

On Writing

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Roosevelt Complex Literacy Institute
Department of Education**

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about writing.

To be asked to talk about writing to a group of teachers of writing is both an honor and a peril. I have been writing and publishing my work for 40 years, but I think this is the first time I have tried to organize what I know about writing. I hope that you will give me the benefit of the doubt as I try to express myself on this topic.

I am especially happy to be here on my old stomping grounds at Roosevelt High School, where I received my first serious instruction in writing. And I am even happier to be here during this time in my life as a writer. This Saturday I will be flying to New York for a meeting with a major publisher that has just acquired the rights to my book.

As you may know, I published a book several months ago. It is entitled, *The Paradoxical Commandments: Finding Personal Meaning in a Crazy World*. It was officially launched this past October by Inner Ocean Publishing, a new publisher on Maui. Two months after the book was launched, Inner Ocean had sold the foreign rights to my book to publishers in a dozen foreign countries. By the end of December, they also had an offer from a major New York publisher that wanted to buy the rights to the book to publish a new edition here in the United States. An agreement has now been reached, and the press release will be out late this week. I am extremely happy and excited about this new turn of events. I am also very grateful to those who helped me learn to write. Several of the people who helped me

learn to write were my teachers here, at Roosevelt High. I appreciate the opportunity to publicly recognize them and thank them.

I would like to talk about four things today. First, I will give you a little background on my life as a writer. Second, I will talk about why I think it is important that students learn to write. Third, I will talk a little about the content standards and criteria for writing. Fourth, I will share my experiences in writing and publishing my new book on the Paradoxical Commandments.

My Career as a Writer

Let me start by giving you a little background on my career as a writer. I think I have loved writing because I have loved reading. I have been an avid reader since the second grade. This may be because my parents read to me, and had me read out loud to them. It may also be because I grew up in a military family, and we moved often. There were times when I didn't have friends, but I could still enjoy a book. To put it another way, some of my best friends were books.

It was in the 10th grade that I first began to learn about the craft of writing. I had Evelyn Lee as my English teacher here at Roosevelt. She had a big impact on me, because she was serious about teaching us how to write. Up until then, I was not very conscious of any rules of writing— I just wrote, and if it looked and sounded right to me, then I was thought I was finished writing. Mrs. Lee actually had some rules. She also assigned books by great writers, as examples to inspire us. Those writers included John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. My biggest single memory of reading those great writers was that all the great writers ignored Mrs. Lee's rules. I think I pointed that out, once, and she replied that when I became a great writer, I could ignore the rules, too.

I recall that we were also taught to write newspaper articles, using that inverted "V." Mrs. Lee also required us to pick a poet and read his or her work and give a report to the class. I picked Walt Whitman, probably because he wrote long prose poems that didn't follow the rules. It was in my sophomore year that I also started my public speaking career, and found that writing a good oration was different from writing a good essay.

In my junior year I had Mrs. Suyeko Kiyosaki as my English teacher. I think that was the year that we worked on long essays that required some research. That is probably when I was taught that I should start my writing with an outline, and then do my research, and put all my separate ideas on index cards, and later assemble the index cards to fit the outline.

That outline method never worked for me. I did the research, and when I began to see the relationship between ideas, I wrote them down. I didn't want to write separate ideas onto index cards. I wanted to write down all the ideas I found, and see how they all looked together. I did all my outlines *after* I was finished writing. I couldn't tell what was going to be a subset of what, until I tested it out— which meant writing it all out to see how it all fit.

In my senior year I had Miss Georginia Thom as my English teacher. Our honors English class attacked the English Romantic poets. Unfortunately, our attack was successful: We killed them. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Shelley, and Keats died in our hands. We scanned lines, argued about words, and analyzed each poem to death. That was when I learned that the truth and beauty and joy and magic that attracted me to poetry depended on technique and mechanics. However, I rebelled at the thought that there was only one way to scan a line of poetry.

In college, I did a lot of expository writing for my classes— term papers and essays. I was the Manager of the Harvard Student Agencies Publishing Division, which published student travel guides. I wrote and published two booklets for high school student leaders, and one for student council advisers. I also studied poetry and had two poetry workshop classes and an individual tutorial on poetry.

The spring semester of my junior year and most of my senior year in college I read and wrote poetry about 40 hours a week— which was quite a feat for a government major. I would go to dinner at 5:15, come back to my room at 6:00, and then read and write until 2:00 in the morning— a typical 8-hour day. I found that reading poetry gave me rhythms and ideas that helped me write, so I usually began by reading poetry for an hour or so. I had heard that good poets wrote hundreds of bad poems before they started writing good ones, so I was anxious to get through my bad ones as soon as possible. Most of my bad ones were self-piteous poems about the absence of a love life.

My first poetry workshop was a strange experience. The students were trying to lead the lives of poets. They imagined the lives of poets to be aesthetic, ethereal, precious, and superior to the mere mortal lives of the rest of us. After taking that workshop, I was even more certain that I was really a government major.

Fortunately, the next semester I managed to get into a very different workshop—the advanced poetry workshop taught by Robert Lowell, a Pulitzer Prize winner in poetry. About 200 of us applied, and 12 were chosen. I was one of the 12.

Those of us who were chosen were feeling pretty good about ourselves. However, the feeling didn't last long. At our first meeting, Lowell explained that he did not choose the best poets who applied. He chose the poets whom he felt he could help the most. He chose the ones who were far enough along to show promise, but not so far along as to be set in their ways. So, in a sense, he did a bit of triage, like a doctor on the battlefield classifying the wounded—some young poets would never make it, even with his help, and some would make it, without his help. We were in the middle group—those who would only make it *with* his help.

We came to class once a week and for a couple of hours, we read our poems to each other. Lowell was encouraging. He looked for what was good in each poem. The poem of mine that he seemed to like the best was a free verse poem about a lady who put her dog into a regular suitcase and checked him in at the airline terminal along with the rest of her luggage. She found him dead when she opened her baggage at the other end of her trip. I was there as she screamed and cried, arched over the body of her dog next to the carousel in the baggage claim area.

To me, the ability and desire to write poetry was related to the rhythm and sounds of daily life. When I went to study at Oxford, the rhythm and sounds of daily life changed, and I stopped writing poetry. After Oxford, I went to study in Japan. The rhythm and sounds of daily life changed again, and I started writing poetry once more—this time, English *haiku*. My Japanese language teachers confided in me that you couldn't write *haiku* in English, so I just said I was writing English poems that happened to have 5, 7, and 5 syllables. I got so involved in *haiku* that I began to carve small woodblock prints to illustrate them. While I was still in Japan, I wrote

articles for the *Hawaii Observer* consisting of my prose, my haiku, and my own original woodblock prints.

During my two years at Oxford and my two years in Japan, I wrote long letters home to my family. I would sit down at the typewriter on Sunday and write for several hours. The letters were a kind of diary. I wrote about 800 pages of single-spaced, typewritten letters during those years. The result was that my parents knew more about me when I was overseas than when I was home.

After studying Japanese, I came back to Hawaii, went to the UH law school, and became an attorney. As an attorney and then a government official, I published conference papers and law journal articles on ocean law and renewable energy. I wrote a law review article on ocean law that was 102 pages long with 572 footnotes. I wrote a booklet setting forth philosophical and practical arguments in favor of economic development, and a science fiction booklet entitled *Hawaii: Looking Back from the Year 2050*. During the past twenty years, I have written feature stories for both major newspapers on economic development, servant leadership, and traveling on the Mainland with our family in an R/V or mobile home.

My doctoral dissertation was my biggest single writing project, totaling 230 pages. One summer, after taking a course in student development in my doctoral program at USC, I had an idea for a novel, and wrote furiously for two days, completing about 50 pages. It was about an institution that was designed to help students grow up and learn about themselves before going on to a traditional college where they would begin their formal academic experience.

In short, over the past 40 years, I have written and published essays, poetry, law review articles, magazine articles, newspaper articles, booklets, book chapters, speeches, academic papers, and most recently, a short book. I have written a play and some fiction, but none of my drama or fiction has been finished, and I have not attempted publication. Each writing project was different. Each had its own goal, subject, style, and limitation on length.

I have written under three sets of technical rules— the Chicago Manual of Style, the blue book for law review writing, and the APA manual for academic writing. All have their preferences for the use of words,

citations, formats, and headings. Part of the challenge of writing has been to fit my work into these different professional formats.

I have always found writing to be an enchanting activity. When I sit down with a blank tablet, or in front of a blank screen on my computer, I am enchanted with a sense of possibility. I know that it is possible that from that blankness, I will create an idea, or an image, or a message that will be unique and will touch others in ways that are useful and meaningful to them. That possibility has enchanted me for most of my life. Sometimes the possibility becomes a reality, but even when it doesn't, the enchantment remains.

I have never been a full-time paid writer. And yet, in each of my five careers, writing has been essential— as an attorney, government official, high tech park developer, university president, and YMCA leader. I have written letters, briefs, memos, action plans, speeches, and articles. I write every day at work. I always have, and I expect I always will. I can't imagine *not* writing. It's part of who I am.

Why Students Should Learn to Write

Let me turn now to my second topic, which is why students should learn to write. I will give you six reasons.

First, and most obviously, it is a valuable skill in the marketplace. Writing ability is useful in a vast array of jobs, and in many jobs, it is highly prized and financially rewarded.

One of the advantages of being a good writer is that it demonstrates that you are a good thinker. What many people don't know is that writing helps writers to think. I don't know what I really think until I try to write it. When it is down on paper, I can see the *pukas* and the problems with my own thinking. Writing forces me to follow a rational process of analysis. It's a great way to think through a problem or issue.

The second reason students should learn to write is that it is a meaningful and deeply satisfying way to express oneself. Writing is a creative experience, and creative experiences help us to be truly alive. Writing can be like dancing, or singing, or painting— it can bring us great pleasure. I think that people should write for the sheer joy of writing. That

would be reason enough for you to teach writing, and reason enough for anybody to sit down and write.

Four years ago, I had an incredible experience. I wrote a novel. It is true that it was a *mediocre* novel, but it was *my* novel. It was something I never thought I could do. It was my first one, and the sheer challenge was exhilarating.

I did some sketches and collected some ideas, and I even read books about how to write a novel. Then for two months, writing that novel was my focus. When I got up every morning, my head was filled with dialogue, and scenes, and plot twists. I rushed to my computer and for four or five hours a day, I wrote, and struggled with the logic of the plot and the development of the characters. I also did research. I needed to learn new things in order to fill in the story line, so I spent hours at the library, and talked to people who were experts. How else could a black-footed ferret have played such a key role in my story?

Writing that 200-page novel was one of the most magical adventures I have ever experienced. One of the side benefits is that I learned to appreciate novelists. In fact, I never really appreciated good novelists until I became a mediocre one myself. Now, when I read a good novel, I am conscious of character development, and plot, and the devices used by the author to introduce facts and characters. This awareness has increased my pleasure in reading.

The third reason students should learn to write is that writing helps us to record our personal growth and development. It is a way to learn who we are, and what we think and feel, at any given point in our lives. Writing our thoughts and feelings is a way to leave footprints in our trail. We can learn about where we are now, and then we can go back and look at where we were before.

I treasure the awkward, embarrassing stories, essays, and poems that I wrote 30 or 40 years ago. They keep me humble, and prevent me from being too critical of my children as they go through the same awkward stages.

The fourth reason that students should learn to write is that they can share their writing with family and friends, building intimacy and understanding, and preserving memories. There are stories that should be

written and passed from generation to generation. When my parents want to know what they can do for me, I tell them to write down the events and describe the people that had the biggest impact on their lives. These are stories that help me to understand my parents as people. These are stories that I can pass on to my children, and they to theirs, to build continuity and share meaning among the generations.

The fifth reason students should learn to write is that technology has made it possible for all of us to share our writing with people beyond our family and friends at low cost. Self-publishing is just not that expensive anymore. You can lay out your book or article with your desktop software, and you can print a limited number of copies at Kinko's. Or you can hire a professional graphics artist and print 1,000 copies of a 100-page book for three or four dollars per copy. Or you can create your own website and put your book on your website. It has become cheaper and easier to do a quality job of sharing your work with others who have similar interests. It is a good way to make friends and build a network of kindred spirits.

The sixth reason that students should learn to write is that some of them will become very good at it, and will become full-time writers. They will become our next generation of poets, essayists, journalists, playwrights, and novelists. Some of the students you teach will become professional writers. You may already have had students who have published articles and books. It must feel great when that happens!

So these are my reasons that students should be encouraged to write. Writing is a valuable skill in the marketplace, it is a wonderful means of self-expression, it is a way to record personal growth and development, it is a good way to share with family and friends, it is a good way to reach out and meet kindred spirits, and it possible to become good enough at it to earn a living as a professional writer.

The Content Standards and Writing Criteria

I have told you a little about my life as a writer, and have suggested six reasons that students should learn to write. Let me shift now to my third topic, which is the content standards and writing criteria.

My first comment is that I like them. Meaning, form and structure, voice, and language— you have a good set of criteria, by grade level, for excellence in writing.

Meaning is the rationale for writing in the first place. If you don't have something to say, why bother? The “so what?” standard is a serious challenge. I have had it thrown at me when writing advertising copy, and when writing my doctoral dissertation. Why waste your own time and your reader's time, if you don't really have something to say? Life is too short.

Form and structure are important to me. In expository writing, the form and structure should be so clear that the reader is swept along, focused on the content. If the reader is focused on the form and structure, something has gone wrong.

In fiction, the object is to tell a story, and the form and structure have more to do with plot and character development than with the logical relationship between facts and theories. Let me give you two contrasting examples of the different way that fiction writers build their books. I was at the Maui Writers Conference in 1997, and heard Elmore Leonard and Terry Brooks talk about how they write.

Leonard has written more than 30 novels, nearly all of which have become movies. For example, he wrote *Get Shorty* and *Out of Sight*. Leonard said that he tries to create interesting characters, and then he just follows them to see what they are going to do. We all chuckled when he said that, because we know it is not that simple. I think his basic point was that characters can only do things that are *in* character if they are to be believable. So once you clearly define a character, there are only certain things that the character can do. Having decided what the lead character or characters are going to do, then the other characters have to react or respond in ways consistent with their own characters, and that is how the plot develops and the story moves forward. In that sense, Leonard may not know how his book will end until he gets to the end. The storyline unfolds until he thinks it's time to stop. Then he goes back to edit.

Terry Brooks had a very different approach. Brooks wrote his first book, *The Sword of Shannara*, in 1977 and has published 15 more since then. He writes fantasy similar to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or David Eddings' *Belgariad*. Brooks stood up at the Maui Writers Conference and

said that the idea that you create characters and then follow them as they go where they want to go is a ridiculous idea. He said that he carefully outlines each novel in its entirety before he starts writing. He knows exactly where he is going, in advance. “I created the characters, and I am in control of them,” he said. “They do what I tell them to do.” We chuckled because, again, it isn’t that simple. But his basic point was that he works out the plot and character development before he starts filling in the story.

In my own writing, I don’t usually start with the outline or structure. That’s one reason I enjoyed watching the movie, *Finding Forrester*, starring Sean Connery. He plays a reclusive author who develops a relationship with Jamal, a young man from the ghetto who has a talent for writing. Forrester puts Jamal at a desk in front of a typewriter and tells him to write. Jamal just sits there, thinking. Forrester tells him he shouldn’t think—he should write! He should just write what comes to mind. Forrester says that the first draft is from the heart, and the second is from the head. From his point of view, you don’t start with an outline, you start with feelings and observations and ideas, and later impose a structure on them. That’s what I like to do.

Voice is something that we need to encourage. It moves beyond the criterion of meaning, in which we want the writer to reveal what is significant or give us fresh perspectives, ideas, or arguments. With voice, we want the writer to be engaged with the topic, to step out from behind the curtain, and tell us what he or she really thinks. Some people are reluctant to do this. The reasons for this reluctance may be simple or complex—the fear of being wrong, or being laughed at, or simply having no desire to thrust oneself forward. But writing is more interesting, and there is more to learn from each other, when writers speak to the reader directly and tell the reader what it’s all about. Young writers should be encouraged to take a stand.

Language is a sore point. Based on my limited exposure to students today, my impression is that there is no commitment to spelling words correctly, and even less commitment to selecting the right word to convey a specific meaning. Perhaps this is because in our daily speech, we rarely use more than 800 or a thousand words. We rely on pointing at things, or looking at pictures or images, or listening to music. We don’t have to describe what we are seeing and hearing, because we can *all* see it and hear it. We utter an occasional monosyllable to convey our opinions or feelings to each other.

Writing, by contrast, is hard work. We have to use words to create pictures and explain ideas, and that requires attention to detail and a broader vocabulary than an occasional monosyllable. We know that this attention to detail and a rich vocabulary can be highly effective and enjoyable to the reader. It is hard for me to think of a movie that was better than the book on which it was based. Movies can be spectacular, but they always leave things out. They always leave out sights and nuances and sub-plots and information that paint a fuller picture of the story and its meaning.

To repeat, I like the writing criteria very much. When it comes to applying them— when it comes to teaching— you know far more than I do. I can make only a few comments.

First, I am grateful to my teachers here at Roosevelt High School for exposing me to many different kinds of writing— poetry, short stories, novels, essays, term papers, newspaper articles. Writing is a craft, and the different forms of the craft have different goals, challenges, and rewards. Students may find one form more suited to their skills and interests than another, so it is good to try them all.

Second, I think that good teaching is about giving good feedback. A good teacher will challenge the student's meaning, structure, voice, and language. A good teacher will ask: What are the assumptions behind this idea? How do these two ideas relate? Why did you use this word? Where do you stand on this issue?

I can tell you that the teachers that *irritated* me the most were the ones who *helped* me the most. I thought I was finished writing, but they didn't think so. They kept asking me questions. They pressed me to do better. In the end, I did better. And today, when I am writing, I ask myself those same irritating questions. I try to press myself to do better.

Third, good teaching encourages creative variations in structure, voice, and language. In poetry, I like both Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman— each very different in structure, voice, and language. We need to reward creative variations in our students. There are so many different kinds of good writing. We can enjoy them all.

Fourth, students who are really interested in writing should be exposed to good writers in person. One spectacular opportunity to meet good

writers is the Maui Writers Conference, which is held on Labor Day weekend each year. The registration fee, hotel, and airfare are expensive. However, but there is a Young Writers Program, and a Young Writers Scholarship Competition. The winners receive scholarships to attend the conference.

There is nothing that makes writing more real than writers talking about their craft. The Maui Writers Conference brings in famous writers in all genres. I have attended twice, and each time, I found it both fascinating and inspiring. Each year nearly 50 writers make presentations, each discussing some aspect of the craft of writing. Editors, publishers, and agents also make presentations. Everybody at the Maui Writer's Conference is interested in writing. It is a wonderful environment for a young writer. It is also a wonderful environment for teachers of writing.

The Story of The Paradoxical Commandments

I have shared a little about my career as a writer, suggested six reasons that students should learn to write, and commented on the standards and criteria. My fourth and final topic this morning is my new book— how I came to write it, and what the writing and publishing process were like.

While I was here at Roosevelt High School, I was active in student government. I was student body president, and I founded the Hawaii Student Leadership Institute to train student leaders. During my college years, I was a consultant on secondary school activities— primarily high school student councils. I worked in eight states, and gave more than 100 talks at schools and conventions.

It was the turbulent sixties, a time of passion and idealism, confrontation and conflict. I saw a lot of idealistic young people go out into the world to do what they thought was right, and good, and true, only to come back a short time later, discouraged, or embittered, because they got negative feedback, or nobody appreciated them, or they failed to get the results they had hoped for. They wanted to be appreciated, and they wanted things to change immediately, and when they *weren't* appreciated, and things *didn't* change immediately, they gave up.

I wanted change, too, but in my writing and speaking during the sixties, I encouraged students to work with each other, and work through the

system, to achieve change. I didn't say it would be easy. I told them that if they were going to change the world, they had to really love people, and they couldn't be in it for fame or glory. I said that if they did what was right and good and true, they would find meaning and satisfaction, and that meaning and satisfaction would be enough. If they had the meaning, they didn't need the glory. Making the world a better place can't depend on applause.

I published my first booklet for student leaders in 1968. It was entitled *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*, and it was only 65 pages. I hired other students to critique the draft, and I made many revisions. The booklet was published by Harvard Student Agencies. My recollection is that the first edition, as well as a later one published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, sold about 25,000 or 30,000 copies between 1968 and 1972.

That booklet included the Paradoxical Commandments. I laid down the Paradoxical Commandments as a challenge. The challenge is to always do what is right and good and true, even if others don't appreciate it. You have to keep striving, no matter what, because if you don't, many of the things that need to be done in our world will never get done.

Some of you are familiar with the Paradoxical Commandments. Here they are:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.

6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.
10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

One of the great surprises and pleasures of my life over the past few years has been to learn how these Paradoxical Commandments have traveled around the world. They were used by Karl Menninger in a speech at the United Nations. They have been translated into Japanese and used in homilies by a Japanese Catholic priest in Tokyo. They have been used by a welfare agency in Texas, a Family Council in Ohio, and the Oklahoma Girls State program. My niece found them on the bulletin board of the teacher's lounge at the private school at which she was teaching in California.

Over the past year I have found the Paradoxical Commandments on more than 80 websites— including websites for Boy Scouts in Canada and the U.S.; websites for Rotarians in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Alabama; a free speech website in Cambodia; a Harvard Business School website; a Special Olympics website in New York; a martial arts website, a cyber-church website, and— well, this is the ultimate— the website of the English Cocker Spaniel Club of America!

My new book is about the Paradoxical Commandments. The book is the result of two events that occurred within three weeks of each other. One event was my attendance at the Maui Writers Conference in 1997, and the other was the death of Mother Teresa a few weeks later.

I have mentioned the Maui Writers Conference. When I first attended it four years ago, it infected me with the joy of writing, and also sobered me

with information about the tough, competitive world of publishing. To get published, a book needs to be well written and have something to say, but it also needs a hook or an angle or some special credibility to get the attention of agents, publishers, the press, and bookstore browsers. I went home in a very somber mood. I didn't have a hook or an angle or any special credibility.

Two weeks later I was at my Rotary Club meeting here in Honolulu. We usually begin each meeting with a prayer or a thought for the day. My fellow Rotarian got up and noted that Mother Teresa had died, and said that in her memory, he wanted to read a poem she had written. I bowed my head in contemplation, and was astonished to recognize what he read out loud—it was eight of the original ten Paradoxical Commandments.

I went up after the meeting and asked him where he got the poem. He said, "Isn't it wonderful?" And I said, "Well, actually, I wrote it." He gave me one of those looks, you know—the one you give a poor, demented, self-delusional megalomaniac. He said it was in a book about Mother Teresa, but he couldn't remember the title.

The next night I went to Borders bookstore at Ward Warehouse and started looking through the shelf of books about the life and works of Mother Teresa. I found it, on the last page before the appendices in a book entitled, *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path*, compiled by Lucinda Vardey. The Paradoxical Commandments had been reformatted to look like a poem, and they had been re-titled "Anyway." There was no author listed, but at the bottom, it said: "From a sign on the wall of Shishu Bhavan, the children's home in Calcutta." Mother Teresa or one of her co-workers thought that the Paradoxical Commandments were important enough to put up on the wall at their children's home, to look at, day after day, as they ministered to the children.

That really hit me. I wanted to laugh, and cry, and shout. I was getting chills up and down my spine. Perhaps it hit me hard because I had a lot of respect for Mother Teresa, and perhaps because I knew something about children's homes—my wife and I adopted our three children from children's homes in Japan and Romania. Whatever the reason, it was as close as I've ever come to getting a message. It was like the heavens opening up and a voice saying, "Hello, down there, we're trying to make this obvious, maybe you should do something about this..."

I now had a hook or an angle. Mother Teresa had my words on her wall. I decided to put aside other writing projects and write a book about the Paradoxical Commandments.

I prepared the manuscript, hired a graphics artist, and was ready to publish the book myself when good fortune struck. Wally Amos— Famous Amos— is a friend from Rotary and the YMCA in Honolulu. Wally had been using the Paradoxical Commandments for years in his own speeches, but he didn't know that I wrote them. When he found out, he also found out that I had a manuscript, and he wanted to read it. He read it on a plane flight to St. Louis one night this past February. When he got off the plane at 1:30 in the morning, he called me back in Honolulu to tell me it was a great book, and I had to meet immediately with Roger Jellinek, his agent. Twelve hours later he called me again, and asked: "Have you met with Roger yet?"

I met with Roger the next day, and he passed my manuscript on to Inner Ocean Publishing, where he is co-editorial director. Inner Ocean Publishing is a new publisher on Maui that has just launched its first five books nationally and internationally. They decided they wanted to publish my book.

Good fortune struck a second time, when Spencer Johnson agreed to do the foreword to the book. As you know, Spencer is the co-author of *The One Minute Manager*, which has sold untold millions of copies in the last 15 years, and recently authored *Who Moved My Cheese?* which has sold more than 4 million copies— probably 5 million by now— in hard cover. My family knew Spencer and his family when he lived here on Oahu, on the North Shore near Haleiwa. He spent many hours with me, encouraging me to do more writing and speaking. It occurred to me that this book was in many ways the result of his dedicated mentoring. I asked him, and he agreed to do the foreword.

When Spencer Johnson agreed to do the foreword, Jane Wesman, a noted publicist in New York City, agreed to do the public relations for the launching of my book. A few months later, the book was printed and heading for distribution. I returned to the Maui Writers Conference last year— just five months ago— and this time, I was at the conference as a new author. I felt very lucky.

Good fortune struck again, when Inner Ocean Publishing decided to go to the international book fair in Frankfurt, Germany, this past October, just three months ago. As I mentioned earlier, they hired an agent who specializes in foreign rights, and she went out and sold the rights to my book in the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Italy, Holland, Denmark, Israel, Brazil, and Japan.

A few days ago, a major New York publisher acquired the rights to the book in the United States. They plan to redesign and republish the book this summer. Meanwhile, my publisher on Maui offered me a contract for three more books, and I signed the contract two weeks ago. They want to do a series of Paradoxical Commandments books, written for specific audiences.

I find all of this both exciting and humbling. I have been very fortunate. A lot of people have helped me along the way, and I am grateful to them.

Writing the Book

Let me tell you a little about how I wrote the book. It is a short and simple book, but it went through many stages.

I write by accumulation. I write, accumulate ideas, and then I edit and revise and edit again. For me and for many other writers, writing is mostly *rewriting*. That is why the invention of the word processor changed my life in a very positive way. Before that, I was the King of Cut and the Prince of Paste.

As I begin to revise and edit, the ideas that don't seem useful, or don't seem to have a place, get dropped to the bottom of the chapter. I leave them there, and look at them from time to time, to see if there is a place for them as the manuscript evolves. If not, they are simply deleted. It's like having more pieces than you need for the jigsaw puzzle, but you don't know which pieces are the extra pieces until you complete the puzzle.

My initial plan was to do an introduction, then a chapter on each of the commandments, and then a concluding chapter about applying the Paradoxical Commandments in daily life. But that seemed too short. Also, I was doing research on sources of personal meaning, and I had a chart that I

was using in my public speaking that contrasted symbols of success with what I called “Meaning Maximizers.” So the first part of my book was about the Paradoxical Commandments, and the second half was about the Meaning Maximizers. Then I thought it would be great to have a third section on how the world would be different if more people lived the Paradoxical Commandments. The book kept getting longer. I spent about a year and a half doing all this initial writing, working a few hours here and there when I could find the time.

The hardest thing about writing the book was finding the right stories. People love stories. They can identify with them and remember them. The challenge is to find good stories that illustrate the right points.

I had some guidelines or goals for the book. I wanted to write a book that was spiritual without being theological or denominational. It is meant to share wisdom without being ideological. I believe that the values expressed are universal. I tried to write it in a way that people of all backgrounds and beliefs, of any religion or no religion, can find something useful in it. I also wanted to write simply and clearly. I think that the great truths of life are basically simple and should be conveyed that way.

When I thought I had a coherent manuscript, I started sharing it with people I respected. After a few people read it carefully, I dropped the section about the world being different. After a lot more people read it, I realized that the section on the Meaning Maximizers was really another book that could stand on its own. I also began to think about who would read my book, and how a shorter book was more likely to actually get read by busy people. I went back to my original idea of an introduction, a chapter on each commandment, and a concluding chapter about living the Paradoxical Commandments in daily life.

Deciding to make the book a short one was a major decision. I decided that I wanted a book that can be read in an hour and a half or two hours. I wanted it to be short so that a busy executive can read it on a plane flight, or a home maker can read it while the kids are taking a nap or at their soccer practice, or a teenager can read it during study hall or while waiting for a ride after school. I wrote it in short chapters that stand alone, and can be read one each night before going to bed, or for a short meditation or quiet time each morning, or a single class at school or Sunday school. I wrote it

that way so more people would be likely to read it. My overarching goal is to get through to people.

After I was clear about the size, shape, and content of the book, I sent it around again for more detailed comments. These next revisions were about individual words and phrases. I am fortunate to have two friends with professional editing experience who were willing to go through it with a fine tooth comb. The final revision stage took about six months. That brought me to the three-year mark. That was when I hired a graphics artist, established my publishing company, and got my book laid out for publication.

The whole point of the development process is to learn how to get through to your readers. To know how you are getting through, you need people who will read your manuscript and tell you what they see or don't see, what they understand and what they don't understand, what moves smoothly and what bogs them down. So I didn't just write the book—I developed it, getting reactions, and rethinking and revising accordingly.

Timing has an impact on how well a book will do, and the role it will play in our society. Nine days after the tragic terrorist attack on September 11, I had my first radio interview about my book. I was interviewed by a radio station in Pittsburgh. The questions kept coming back to the terrorist attack. I said that I thought that while we needed to track down the perpetrators, and improve our security systems, I thought that what we really needed to do was to reflect, and re-focus, and re-dedicate ourselves to the people and values that mean the most to us in our lives. I said that the greatest tribute we could pay to those loved ones we had lost, was to live good lives—to live lives of love and hope, focused on our families and friends, and our most cherished values.

If we want to truly honor those who have died, we can do it by strengthening our families, our communities, and our nation. We can live *better* than we would have lived, if the tragedy had not reminded us of how precious life is, and how little time each of us may have.

I think many Americans have reflected on the meaning of life since the terrorist attack on September 11. I would love to see a sustained period of reflection. After all, we *know* what is most meaningful to us—family, friends, giving and receiving love. We just have to remind ourselves, and each other, to live that way. That is my hope for my book—that it will be

part of that reminding, part of that renewal and rededication that can be so beneficial to us as individuals and as a nation.

The Gift of Writing

That completes my presentation. I have told you a little about my writing career, and why I think students should learn to write. I have commented on the standards and criteria, and I have told you about my book.

Let me close now with a few words of encouragement. As teachers, you know that you have a huge impact on young people and the courses their lives will take. I urge you to continue your great work as teachers of writing. Writing can make a huge difference in the quality of your students' lives.

I am still astonished at the impact of the written word. It seems miraculous that one human being can write letters on a page and conjure up images, and thoughts, and feelings that others can read and understand—today or in centuries to come. Writing is such an effective way to express meaning, to raise our unique voices, and to build community. It is such a simple, accessible way to discover who we are and what is important to us. When you teach a young person to write, and to enjoy writing, you have given that young person a great gift. And when that young person uses that gift, the impact of your contribution will continue and will expand, from generation to generation.

You are doing noble work. God bless you, and Godspeed!

Thank you.